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ABSTRACT

A solution to staff development and instructional improvement for rural and small school teachers is through self-initiated and/or self-styled improvement programs using the mental rehearsal strategy. Mental rehearsal is the process of using imagery to practice teaching behavior before actually teaching. If rural educators can be trained to mentally rehearse methods, activities, demonstrations, and teaching behavior, they can provide themselves with a means of instructional improvement through their own self-initiated, self-improvement program. Common purposes of mental rehearsal are relaxation, positive thinking, and psychological preparation of a task. Mental rehearsal can be used to focus on specific verbal cues (accepting emotion, praising, questioning, lecturing, or criticizing) and nonverbal cues (energy level, touching, use of time, teacher travel, eye contact, posture, silence, facial features, or use of space) during classroom interaction and classroom teaching. Questions pertaining to mental rehearsal are discussed, such as what types of mental rehearsal are possible, when does mental rehearsal occur, how frequently should mental rehearsal occur, and where should mental rehearsal occur. (ERB)

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HELPING RURAL EDUCATORS IMPROVE
INSTRUCTION THROUGH MENTAL REHEARSAL



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The need for staff development and instructional improvement exists in all schools. However, rural and small school teachers have unique needs because they rely very heavily on their own initiative and resources for much of their instructional improvement activities. The reasons for this self-reliance are fairly obvious. Rural teachers are isolated geographically and have fewer opportunities for inservice. Also teacher interaction and idea exchange among rural teachers may be good, but the interaction and idea exchange may be small or limited when compared to urban teachers. Finally, rural teachers may find less opportunity to work with curriculum specialists, supervisors, or administrators in instructional improvement activities.

Self-initiated and/or self-styled improvement programs are a solution. Current self-styled instructional improvement methods include videotaping, self-critiquing, self-assessment observation instrument and student feedback (Bailey, 1981a, 1981b). One of the most exciting new strategies in this area is mental rehearsal.

Mental rehearsal is the process of using imagery to practice teaching behavior prior to the act of teaching (Bailey and Hortin, 1982; Hortin, 1981; Hortin and Bailey, in press). It is a process of imagining, thinking about and visualizing the act of teaching before an imagined audience. If rural educators can be trained to mentally rehearse methods, activities, demonstrations and teaching behavior, they can provide themselves with a means to instructional improvement through their own self-initiated, self-improvement program. Mental rehearsal can be used with many other forms of self-directed, self-improvement strategies such as self-critiquing, videotaping observation instruments or student feedback.

Mentally rehearsing a presentation before the imagined class gives the teacher another alternative when attempting to improve his/her instruction.

One of the most common purposes of mental rehearsal is relaxation. The use of mental rehearsal can be used by the rural teacher to relax himself or herself prior to the teaching lesson. This means mental concentration of how to relax different parts of the body. Again, this type of mental rehearsal is very similar to a type of mental rehearsal used by athletes. Teachers can use this type of mental concentration to relax the tension of muscles, direct the flow of blood and coordinate activities of the physical body. The process of mental rehearsal is to concentrate on the physical attributes of the body which allow the teacher to achieve a relaxed, but confident mental state.

The use of mental rehearsal for positive thinking is not a new concept. Teachers usually find that their mood during the act of teaching is influenced by how they felt prior to the actual lesson. If one feels positive about teaching, students and the content, there is greater likelihood for a successful classroom teaching experience. With negative feelings about teaching, students and the content, there is less likelihood for a positive teaching experience. Mental rehearsal can be used as a technique to achieve positive feelings about events that will transpire. Higher concentration of positive thoughts concerning self and the rewards of teaching can affect the ultimate performance of the teacher. Teachers who practice mental rehearsal with positive thinking as the focus often concentrate on: (1) previous

positive teaching experiences, (2) similar previous conditions that were pleasant and successful and (3) a positive frame of mind about being successful.

The most common example of positive thinking working in reverse (negative mental rehearsal) can be observed in daily life. Picture the individual who is anticipating a scheduled appointment with the dentist. In that person's mind, there are negative thoughts about the upcoming visit. The person envisions the dentist drilling or pulling a tooth; the pain can be felt. If these negative thoughts occur on numerous occasions, the person begins to become apprehensive and negative about the upcoming experience. In all likelihood, the person prepares himself or herself for the worst. The person who practices this type of negative mental rehearsal reinforces negative thoughts. Either the person's expectations are fulfilled or if nothing bad happens, the person suffers from mental and physical fatigue. The products of negative mental rehearsal are less than positive in either outcome.

The third type of mental rehearsal is not uncommon to those people in many professions who need to "get ready" for the task. It is the psychological preparation which leads to either a feeling of exhilaration or calm. This form of psychological preparation is chosen because it allows the person to complete the task with ease and efficiency. The terms coined by these people who use this form of preparation are psych up or psych down. Mental rehearsal involves the mental creation of an attitude or the creation of an aura which will prevail during the period of time that the individual must perform. The state of mind and condition of the

body are important to the ultimate performance. In this type of mental rehearsal, the teacher can conjure many different thoughts that assists in developing the appropriate mental and physical readiness.

Teachers can identify with this act when they are faced with going into a class and demonstrating an attitude toward the class or subject. This psyching up or psyching down is frequently necessary in order to convince the students of the instructor's sincerity or interest. Without doubt, the teacher's mental and physical readiness impacts on the learning situation and this readiness can be achieved through mental rehearsal.

Teachers can use mental rehearsal to focus on specific verbal cues that are used in their classroom interaction, (Bailey, 1981b). Examples of these verbal cues include: (1) accepting feeling or emotion, (2) praising or encouraging, (3) accepting or building on student ideas, (4) questioning, (5) lecturing, (6) direction giving, (7) criticizing or justifying authority. These are terms drawn from Flanders' Interaction Analysis which is a recognized observation instrument describing teacher behavior.

Teachers can also use mental rehearsal to focus on specific nonverbal cues that are used in classroom teaching. Examples of these nonverbal cues include: (1) energy level, (2) touching, (3) use of time, (4) teacher travel, (5) eye contact, (6) gestures, (7) mannerisms, (8) posture, (9) silence, (10) facial features, and (11) use of space (Bailey, 1981b).

If the teacher is able to pinpoint specific nonverbal cues, he/she can mentally rehearse the quality of the behavior to perfect its use in actual classroom interaction.

Content emphasis in mental rehearsal refers to factual information which is actually being talked about by the individual teacher. It essentially encompasses four qualities: (1) what; that is, cognitive information selected by the teacher as important, (2) how much; this refers to the depth of the content which is selected. When the teacher determines the area, becoming familiar with the depth of the information becomes important in the actual delivery stage, (3) sequence refers to the order of the information. The teacher can order the events in a sequence which influences the outcome, and (4) time allotment which denotes the amount of time spent on a topic can be important to teachers as they engage in mental rehearsal.

Mental rehearsal of content is often observed in other forms of human interaction. When individuals find themselves in a debate, an argument or need to make a special presentation, they often engage in mental rehearsal which allows them to do a better job for that "special" situation.

Rehearsing the method the teacher has chosen to convey the information is also important to the outcome of the classroom lesson. Methodologies such as inquiry, contracting, lecture, gaming/simulation, etc. have distinct characteristics which manifest themselves in teacher behavior. If the teacher can visualize these behaviors, they can be practiced. If a number of behaviors can be identified as critical or important to the methodology, they can be visualized mentally by the teacher. Not only the precise kind of behaviors but the sequencing of these behaviors becomes important in the methodological outcome.

Post-teaching reflection refers to the period of time that occurs when the teacher has finished the lesson. It is that time period when the teacher ponders the events which have just occurred during classroom instruction. For some teachers, this will be a fleeting moment or it can be a long, sustained period of time. For others, it will be a continual replay of the classroom events. During this time, the teacher has the ability to focus on what "went right" as well as what "went wrong." Almost all teachers will admit that it is easy to focus on the "wrong" instead of the "right." Used in a positive fashion, the teacher has the ability to replay these events which will result in the same or better during the next classroom interaction session. Carefully controlled, this practice can lead to significantly improved classroom practices.

What types of mental rehearsal are possible?

The types of mental rehearsal are varied. They include:

1. Total: Viewing the entire teaching act in your mind (e.g. set, instructional body and closure).
2. Partial: Viewing specific segments of the teaching act in your mind [e.g. set (beginning) or closure (ending)] and
3. Fragmented: Viewing dimensions of the teaching act (e.g. nodding of head when reinforcing students).

When does mental rehearsal occur?

Again, mental rehearsal can occur at almost anytime:

1. Prior to the lesson.
2. Immediately after the teaching act.
3. At the end of the day and
4. At the beginning of the day.

The answer is different for different people. Rural teachers need to find the most appropriate time for them. This will require a great deal of

trial and error.

With what frequency should mental rehearsal occur?

Teachers will vary a great deal in the frequency of mental rehearsal. Obviously, the teacher cannot devote long periods of time to practice. Too much mental rehearsal may also prove counterproductive to the teacher's effectiveness. For classification purposes, there appears to be three main way of defining frequency:

1. Frequently: an on-going daily practice.
2. Periodic: regular or weekly sessions when a perceived need exists.
3. Infrequently: only at those times during the years when an urgent or emergency situation exists.

Teachers have testified that the frequency of mental rehearsal is constantly changing depending on the emotional, physical and mental needs at a given time. With continued research, educators will be able to determine how often teachers engage in mental rehearsal.

Where should mental rehearsal occur?

No known answer exists to this question. The hidden value in mental rehearsal is that it can occur almost anywhere. Common sense suggests that an environment should be chosen that allows visual and audio isolation or atleast a location that permits a high degree of concentration without interruption.

Mental rehearsal offers a unique opportunity for rural educators to engage in staff development. Mental rehearsal is not unwieldy like many other staff development strategies. However, if quality mental rehearsal is to be developed, existing skills must be refined. Those rural teachers dedicated to instructional improvement will find mental rehearsal rewarding and extremely practical if approached with common sense and openness.

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